

## Iron in the Soul

by ldiagonalscar

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Summary: Drabble prompt from Oberin: "this is without a doubt the stupidest plan you've ever had. Of course I'm in." Seifer and Quistis drown their sorrows after the SeeD ball.

## Iron in the Soul

Quistis walks away before he has chance to reply. Even though she knew it would turn out like this she still feels frustrated by the futility of her attempt to connect with him, to draw him out of himself, to make him see her as something other - anything other - than an authority figure or an obstacle or an annoyance.

"Maybe they're right," she mutters, angrily. "Maybe I do lack leadership qualities." She hesitates just for a moment, listening to the sounds of the ball winding down, the happy revellers spilling out into the stairway, and knows she can't face them again. But she can hear his footsteps behind her, and doesn't want to face him either, so she hurries around the lobby, making for the library. This far past curfew, no-one will be there.

Except, it seems, for Almasy. From his expression, he's as pleased to see her as she is him.

"Instructor." He nods as she passes him, leaning against the wall of the corridor, not doing anything.

"Almasy." She walks past; stiffens only slightly at the title that is no longer hers, hoping that he won't notice. But she feels his eyes on her; hesitates; turns.

His little grin that is always almost a sneer. One eyebrow not quite raised in anticipation.

"Almasy... I..."

He cuts her off with a gesture. "Don't bother, Instructor."

\_Should I tell him\_, she wonders? \_It's past midnight, and in the morning everyone will know anyway, and maybe it would just be better to get this out of the way now, here, when there's only the two of us\_. But then she looks at him again, half-hidden in the shadows, sees the hard glitter of his eyes, and understands.

"How do you know?"

He laughs a dry mirthless laugh. "Never mind." He wipes his mouth with the back of a gloved hand before taking a long pull from the bottle he's holding. "Drink?" He holds the bottle out, shaking it slightly. Thick liquid sloshes behind the dark glass, trapping the dim light.

"Where did you get this?" She reaches for the bottle, against her better judgement. "Students aren't allowed liquor, you know that."

He holds on to the neck for a long moment, and she can see all the barbed responses jostling for position, but he lets the bottle go without saying anything.

"What are we drinking to?" She raises the bottle to her mouth, tips the acrid liquid onto her tongue.

"Our shared humiliation."

She splutters whiskey into the air. "Damn it, Seifer!"

He chuckles again. "Truth hurts, doesn't it?" Raises an empty hand against her protest. "You know it's true. Look at what they've done to us, Quistis. Look what they've done to \_you\_."

\_Quistis...\_ She can't remember if he's ever called her by her name before. Surely he has, in some insolent moment when she'd required his respect and been met with scorn. But the shape of the word in his mouth is unfamiliar to her; wrong-sounding and almost like an obscenity; like a violation. A little shiver runs through her.

"Seifer, I..." She hesitates, unsure of what she's trying to say. "No-one did anything to you. You're insolent and hot-headed and have no respect for authority and you're not a SeeD because you think the rules apply to everyone except you. No-one did that to you. You did that."

His fists ball into knots, and just for a moment she thinks he's going to hit her. "Quistis," and she shudders slightly at the sound of her own name, "you're so blind. Blind stupid obedience to your stupid masters. Even when they've used you up and thrown you away." He reaches towards her, and she recoils slightly, in spite of herself, half afraid of him here in the darkened corridor, stripped of her authority, half wanting him to do something, but all he wants is the bottle back. "Look at yourself. You had everything, Quistis. You were the girl with the bright golden future. The child prodigy. The best of us."

She opens her mouth to interrupt, to protest, but he won't let her

speak. "That's what they told us. Sometimes in so many words. You were the shining example of what we could be." Seifer pauses, shakes his head, gives her a look she can't quite fathom. "Your own fanclub, for Hyne's sake."

"I never wanted any of that. I never encouraged them. I just wanted to do my job."

"But that just made it worse! Anyone else, being idolised would have changed them. But not you. Not Instructor Treppe. You were too much a good little cog for any of that." He pauses, and takes another drink. "That's what we are, Quistis, all of us. Human cogs. The only difference is, you and me, we've been shown our place in the machine. And you know the thing about cogs."

Quistis shakes her head.

"They're replaceable." He holds out the bottle. Quistis takes another drink.

They sit for a while in silence, slumped against the corridor's wall, passing the bottle backwards and forwards. Quistis sees him watching her; wonders what the questions are that he isn't asking. She's good at reading people â€" lack of emotional intelligence hadn't been her failing â€" but Almas is all surface. She knows it's an act, and knows the character he's playing as well as she knows anyone. Suddenly she finds herself wanting to see behind the mask.

"Okay." Seifer clambers to his feet. "Fun as this is, I'll be in the disciplinary room tomorrow, and I don't particularly want to spend my last night of freedom sitting on a cold floor with a cold fish. So I'll tell you what." Again, he ignores her protest. "You wanted to know how I knew? I'll show you."

\_Cold fish?\_ Quistis pushes herself upright, the third of a bottle of whiskey she's just drunk coiling like magma in her guts. "What are you talking about now, Almas?"

"Your... \_demotion\_. Come on." He holds out a hand, and Quistis almost takes it.

"Where are we going?"

"Cid's office."

"The Headmaster's office?"

"Yes, the \_headmaster's\_ office. You know why I failed. You told me so. I know why you failed, but you won't believe me, so I'm gonna show you."

"Show me what?"

"Hyne's skin! The report on you! When I was up there being lectured on my heroic failure it was on Cid's desk. So I took a look. And now you're going to take a look, and maybe then you'll understand what they really think of us all."

Quistis shakes her head. "It's a nice idea - no, it's a stupid idea - a really stupid idea, and even if you could - which you can't -

breaking in to the headmaster's office would be a step too far even for you. You know what they'd do to you if you got caught?"

"To us, if we got caught." Seifer smiles at her, and all of a sudden Quistis knows that - no matter how stupid whatever they are about to do is, stupid and dangerous and potentially even worse than what has already happened to her - they are going to do it. "Doesn't matter to me. I'm a failure. I already told you, I'll be in the disciplinary room tomorrow anyhow."

Quistis sighs, and wonders what it would be like, being confined with him. "Even by your standards, this is without a doubt the stupidest plan you've ever had. I can't quite believe it myself, but I'm in."

"The stupidest one you know about, maybe." He grins at her, and just for a moment Quistis sees something else under the anger and the arrogance.

"Come on, then," she says, hurriedly. "Show me how we're supposed to get in there."

It turns out that they are going to climb. Seifer leads her through the first floor lobby, every so often a raised hand to warn of an approaching Garden Faculty on the look-out for curfew breakers, and they duck down behind one of the planters, or freeze in the glow of the directory. By the time they make it to the elevator Quistis is breathless and laughing with the unfamiliar thrill of mischief.

"Come on come on come on come on!" she whispers, loudly, thumbing the control panel, willing the door to open.

"One's coming," Seifer hisses, and she doesn't know if he means elevator or Garden Faculty until the door has opened and they've tumbled inside. "Creepy fuckers," Seifer says.

Quistis pulls her shoulders up around her ears and flips her hair into her face. "You are SeeDs, you must set an example to all others and abide by the Garden's rules. Understood!?" she intones.

Seifer gives a short bark of laughter. "Come on, Instructor, we're there." He leads her out of the elevator, past the classrooms, and she only feels a momentary pang of sadness before he's opening the balcony door.

"But this is the emergency exit," she says, still not understanding.

Seifer points to the narrow metal ladder. It vanishes up the curve of the Garden's wall into the darkness. Quistis looks doubtful.

"In these shoes?"

"Take them off, then."

The metal is cold under her bare toes, but it's easier than she'd thought. The ladder hugs the Garden, and once she's up over the bulge of the wall all she has to worry about is the wind that seems to want to whirl her away into the night sky. She pauses, eyes screwed up

against the gusts, and feels it toying with her; wonders what it would be like if she just let go and let it carry her away. She opens her eyes, and sees the nighttime world laid out before her. Away in the distance, Balamb is just a pale smudge around the sparkle of its harbour, and beyond the pinpricks of light that mark the breakwater the waves in Feinoil Bay are flecked with phosphorescence. Only the peaks of the Gualg mountains are visible, hard and cold in the moonlight, their feet lost in the dark forests.

"Hey!" Seifer's voice breaks into her reverie. "You fall asleep up there?"

The ladder ends on a small ledge, only just wide enough for the two of them to stand side by side. The wall bulges out behind them, and above their heads, over the outermost point of the curve, metal staples protrude from the wall. Quistis eyes them doubtfully. "You've done this before, right?" she says.

"Once," Seifer nods. "I'm going to have to lift you up."

"You're going to what?"

"I'm going to lift you up." He gestures to the staple above their heads. "You can't reach it from here - it's an escape route, you're not meant to climb up it. Me, I can do it," he stretches up, and takes hold of the cold rung.

"You can't pull yourself up there."

Seifer shrugs. "Yeah, I can," he says quietly, and Quistis realises that for once he's not boasting, that he's not trying to impress her, he's just stating a fact. He must be strong, she thinks, and wonders what else she's never wondered about Seifer Almasy.

"Okay, then," he says, and drops his arms. "I need to stand behind you, and there's not room if you face the wall, so you'll have to be sideways." He waits. "Go on, then."

Quistis turns away from the wall, feeling the wind tugging at her again, and tries to keep the hair out of her eyes. Seifer puts an arm around her waist, and she gives a little involuntary flinch.

"I can't really do this without touching you," he says.

"Just get on with it," she snaps. Truth be told, she likes it. No-one ever touches her, Instructor Treppe, up on her pedestal, and somewhere inside her there is a thing that she's not quite ready to admit to. A thing that she isn't quite ready to recognise but is almost half certain might be relief. Seifer's arm is hard and strong, like a growing tree, and as he wraps his other arm around her and steps up close behind, so close that she can feel his chest against her shoulders, his knees against her thighs, she's almost wants to just stay like this for ever. Just stay here with someone holding her and let all the responsibility, all the authority, all the disappointment fall away. But then she remembers who it is. "Get on with it," she says again.

She feels his knees bend slightly and suddenly she is off the ground. "Lift up your arms," he says, and she's almost annoyed at how relaxed he sounds, at how effortless it seems. But she does as he says, and

feels the cold steel of the staple under her fingers. "Got it?"

"Got it," she says, and suddenly realises that she's more than half drunk, hanging a hundred feet in the air on the outside of the Garden, and only has Seifer Almasi between her and oblivion. She starts to laugh.

"For Hyne's sake, don't let go," Seifer says, and he sounds so annoyed that her laughter dissolves into giggles.

"This was your idea," she says.

For a moment he's silent, and she can feel him trembling with the effort of holding her there. "Don't make me regret it. Are you holding on to that? I need to change my grip."

"Yep." Little bubbles of laughter are still rising through her. She feels Seifer relax his hold on her, feel his arms unwind from around her waist, feels herself swing free in the wind. Feels her gloved hand start to slip off the rung.

"Seifer!" she starts to shout, but his hands are under her buttocks and suddenly she's half sitting on his shoulder.

"Got it this time?" His voice is muffled by the fabric of her skirt.

Her blood is loud in her ears, her heart pounding, and she tells herself it's because she almost fell to her death and nothing to do with where his hands are, or the fact that she can feel one of his cheeks pressed against one of hers. "Got it," she says, hoping that he can't hear how she sounds over the wind. Hoping that he can. He's pushing again, hands hard against her, and she grabs for the rung above her head, pulls herself up and over the curve of the wall onto the tiny platform outside the window of Cid's darkened office.

She kneels there for a moment until her breathing calms, before she inches around to peer back down to where Seifer is, hidden below the arc of the Garden. "Seifer?" she calls.

"Okay, one minute." She smiles to herself at the sound of him, out of breath and trying to hide it, and then his hands appear on the lowest staple. He hangs there for just a moment before his head rises into view as he pulls himself up. He's taken off his coat, and she almost tries not to look at his bouldered shoulders humping and the roll of the long muscles in his arms. Almost tries not to think about what it felt like to have those arms around her waist.

"Move back," he grunts as he pulls himself up onto the platform, and she does, but too slowly, and here he is - Seifer Almasi - standing so close to her that if she leant forwards even slightly...

He lifts an arm, reaches past her shoulder, and all she can see is the strong spring of his neck and the swell of his pectorals as he breathes. She can smell him, fresh sweat cooling in the chill air. She lifts a hand.

"There," he says, and pushes the big window open, moving her aside to step through.

"Seifer," and as he turns back towards her she follows him into the room, takes hold of his shoulders and pulls him down towards her into a kiss, feels his hot breath in her mouth as his opens in surprise, slips her tongue past his lips. There's the tiniest moment of hesitation, and then he is kissing her back, and his hands are on her and she pushes him, pushes him away and they go down to the floor together.

"Quistis..." his voice is more breath than word, and she is pushing him back against the floor and there is moonlight in his eyes, black and hard and glittering and her hand is on his chest and her teeth bite down against his hot flesh. She feels him stop fighting, feels him give himself up to her, to her mouth. Hears his surprise turn into inarticulate sounds of pleasure, to gasps as she bites his lip and her hands are everywhere on him, in his hair, on his shoulders, tugging at his vest, scattering buttons across the carpet. Seifer's fingers are pulling at her hips, and she pushes him down, hunched over him, her long hair trailing across his chest. Small jerky movements of her hips, his hands under her clothes, one of hers pressed against the meat of his pectorals, white in the moonlight, the other to her mouth, one cocked knuckle caught between her clenched teeth as she grinds against him. The hiss of his breath and her soft cry as she lowers herself onto him.

She's lying with her head cradled in the crook of his arm, his fingers toying idly with the long strands of hair that fall around her face.

It's a while before either of them speaks.

"Look at what they've done to us, Seifer," she says, and he laughs, pushing himself up on his elbows.

"Maybe I'd better find that report," he says.

"No need." Quistis worms herself around to face him. "He read it to me, already."

Seifer is silent for a moment, then laughs again.

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file.